

Her Story: Elizabeth Gleason Quane Skelley

As a pioneer, Elizabeth Gleason Quane Skelley traveled from New York to Illinois by train and horse drawn wagon in 1836. In 1857 she continued her journey by steamboat and wagon to Minnesota. In the U.S. Dakota War of 1862, her husband Jeremiah Quane was killed by the Dakota. She raised her children on the \$12 monthly Civil and Indian War widow's pension. This is her story.

In Troy, New York on May 7, 1834, Elizabeth Gleason was born, the eldest child of James and Catherine Hayes Gleason. James was a carpenter from County Limerick and Catherine Hayes was Irish also.

In 1836, as construction began on the Illinois River Canal, many Irish Erie Canal workers from Troy migrated to Illinois for jobs. Elizabeth was three when her parents started the 900-mile journey west. Arriving in Chicago, they traveled by wagon along the route later followed by the Rock Island Railroad. Their 133-acre farm on the banks of Cedar Creek (now Putnam County in the Illinois River valley) was about fifty acres of rough bluff land, the rest, bottom and swampland.

In September 1848, Elizabeth married Jeremiah (Jerry) Quane. She was 14 years old and Jerry was 23. Jerry was born in Maryborough, Queens County, Ireland. His family left Ireland in 1827 for Quebec City, Canada. Six years later, their mother, Honora, died. Her mother, Hannah Duggan, helped raise the children. Jerry and Elizabeth lived with Jerry's father for the first years of their marriage. She was seventeen when her first son, John Dennis (J.D.) was born.



Figure 1 Elizabeth Gleason Quane Skelley abt. 1910

A cholera epidemic broke out the next year – 1852.

Elizabeth Quane was so close to death that her coffin, shroud, and all the preparations for the funeral were completed before it was discovered that life was not fully extinct. During the years that intervened between her illness in 1852 and her departure for Minnesota she was landlady of a hotel, boarded wood choppers and quarry hands in a shanty, and had a try at farming. ⁱ

When Elizabeth was 23 years old, she moved to Minnesota territory.

The journey was by wagon to Dunlieth where a steamboat was taken to St. Paul, where the wagon was again taken to Lake Prairie in Nicollet County. She made this trip in company with her brother-in-law John Quane and her three children, the youngest a year old and the oldest five years old. She arrived at the log cabin, then owned by John Quane, on the seventh or eighth

day of May 1857 and it was her home for nearly eighteen months. Her husband, who had remained in Illinois to sell his property and close up some contracts did not arrive in Minnesota until October, six months after she and their children.

Few people...can realize how wild the country was at that time. [Her] nearest neighbor was a mile distant. The shanty in which she made her home was set against the side of an almost perpendicular hill and lonesomeness stared a person in the face at every turn. Then, too, the Indian trail from Mendota to the Indian Agency passed close to the shanty and she was terribly afraid of Indians. ⁱⁱ

In March of 1857, the year Elizabeth arrived, Inkpaduta, a Dakota Chief, raided Spirit Lake, Iowa, killing 35 settlers and kidnapping women and a young child. The newspaper stories were terrifying. Despite her fears, Elizabeth gave food to Indians who came to her shanty and asked for food.

In 1859, the Quanes moved into St. Peter. Local residents typically fenced their gardens and fields and let the livestock run free. This practice resulted in a little humor at Jerry Quane's expense, as reported in the *St. Peter Tribune* on May 2, 1860:

GONE DEAD-One of Jerry Quane's gray horses fell dead on Sunday afternoon while feeding near town. While we deeply sympathize with Jerry in the loss of Old Gray, we cannot forget that many a time and oft last summer were we aroused in the dead of night to defend our garden from his reckless assaults. No fence was strong enough to prevent his entrance and no club was long enough to hurry him out. Many a bean-pole have we broken over his back but he bore it all with meekness and resignation. Peace to his remains. ⁱⁱⁱ

By August 1862, Jerry and Elizabeth had five children, the youngest six months old, the oldest eleven years old. On August 19, when the Dakota under Little Crow attacked New Ulm, Jerry Quane enlisted in the St. Peter Company under Charles Flandrau.

During Sunday afternoon [August 24] search was made for the recovery of the dead....Jerry Quane, a St. Peter volunteer, had the totem of Little Crow attached the clothing over his breast. The totem was the skin of a crow, preserved in its natural form, symbolic of his family name. The parting with such a treasured emblem was to boastfully inform us from whom the brave defender had met his death. ^{iv}

Elizabeth's son J.D. Quane writes later:

When the news of the death of the breadwinner of the family was received, she did not have a cent of money in the house and not much more than flour and provisions enough to last herself and children a week. Did she sit down and wring her hands in despair, not much; she squared her shoulders and went into the fight to win. ^v

Mrs. Harriet Dodd, widow of Captain Dodd, Jerry's company commander who was also killed in the fight, described paying \$50 to bring her husband's body to St. Peter for burial. Without a cent of money in the house, Elizabeth could not afford the \$50 to have her husband's body brought to St. Peter. Jerry Quane's body was buried in the New Ulm Street and then disinterred and buried in a long-forgotten location.

Son J.D. described what was next for Elizabeth:

The opportunities for a woman in those days consisted of washing, ironing, scrubbing, house cleaning, nursing and sewing. When she did anything, she did it with all her heart and in a short time she made a demand for her services. By her determination and application she kept her children together and reared them to womanhood and manhood, educated them as well as she could, and put them in the way of getting on in life. ^{vi}

Elizabeth applied for and received a Civil and Indian War pension of \$8 per month plus \$2 per month per child under 16 years of age. In 1870, she moved to North Mankato where she was a devout member of St. John's Catholic Church and a member of their Guild, the ladies' relief society.

In 1890, New Ulm erected the Defenders' Monument on Center Street with the names of those who perished defending New Ulm. Jerry Quane's name is on the roster of those killed – Captain Charles E. Flandrau's Co., St. Peter Frontier Guards.



Figure 2 Defenders Monument, New Ulm

Son J.D. described an incident in January of 1893, when Elizabeth...

..was cleaning some dresses with gasoline near the kitchen fire, and as she passed the stove with a waister in her hand, she set on the kettle to boil some water. She says the next thing she knew the room was all in a blaze...She smothered the fire in her clothing, but towels and other articles on the walls continued to burn and her clothing again took, as did the carpet on the floor. She again succeeded in extinguishing the fire in her clothing. Then she stepped into her bedroom and got a quilt, which she saturated in a pail full of water and with this, she put out the fire, and saved the house. She is terribly burned about her arms and hands. Her hair, eyebrows and eyelashes were singed off. She was a pitiable looking object after her fight for life and her home. She was alone at the time and as soon as she was certain she had the fire out she went several blocks to a neighbors for assistance. ^{vii}

He continued proudly, "It is the most plucky piece of work ever done in this city. She fought the fire with closed doors and she won."

On February 20, 1898 at St. John's Catholic Church, Elizabeth married James Skelley of St. Peter. Skelley served with Henry Hastings Sibley in the U.S.-Dakota War, was with him at Camp Release, and on his 1863 expedition into the Dakota Territory. He served as a witness on Elizabeth's widow's pension application.

On March 25, 1922, after a long illness, Elizabeth passed away in Mankato. Her second husband, James Skelley, had passed away the year before. Her remains were brought to LaSalle, Illinois by train and accompanied by her son J.D. They were laid to rest in the family lot beside the graves of her parents, a son, and a daughter.



Figure 3 Quane Skelley family: JD Quane back left, Elizabeth (Mrs. O.), Francis Quane Steel, Jennie Mather Quane (Mrs. JD), Oliver Quane. Seated: James Skelley, Elizabeth Gleason Quane Skelley. Children seated: Wesley, Olive, Austin Quane

Son J.D. Quane became a publisher and editor of the *Weekly Ledger* in North Mankato. He married Jennie Mather, fourth great granddaughter of Joseph Talcott (1667-1741), Dame Ann Essling's colonial ancestor. The couple was married for 63 years, and had four children. Son Oliver, Ann's great grandfather, followed his father into the printing trade and was a veteran of four wars.

Dame Ann Essling is author of the book *Historic Mendota Before 1863: A Walk Through Time Where the Waters Meet* and has also written for *Minnesota History* magazine and the *Swedish American Genealogist* in addition to her technical writing portfolio. She has served on the board of the NSCDA-MN including First Vice President and Communications Chair and is active in the Friends of the Sibley House.

Colonial Ancestor

Governor Joseph Talcott was born in 1669 in Hartford, Connecticut. His grandfather John Talcott was one of the founders of Hartford. He married his first wife, Abigail Clark, in 1693 and they had three children. Joseph began his military career in 1697. After his wife's death in 1705, he married Eunice Wakeman and they had six children. He was commissioned major of the First Regiment of Connecticut troops in 1710. He became Deputy Governor in 1723 and Governor from 1724-1741. He died in November 1741.

Resources

Ancestry.com database online, *Ann Essling Family Tree* accessed December 11, 2019.

Civil and Indian War pension application of Elizabeth Quane #81,660 Book B Vol 3 p. 139. Department of the Interior Pension Office January 27, 1868.

Connecticut Historical Society Museum and Library, Governor Joseph Talcott., accessed via Ann Essling Family Tree December 11, 2019.

"Couple Married 60 Years Ago," *St. James Plaindealer*, St. James, MN August 28, 1938.

Find A Grave entry for Defenders' Monument, New Ulm MN accessed December 11, 2019.

"Joseph Talcott, Governor of the Colony of Connecticut,"
<https://museumofcthistory.org/2015/08/joseph-talcott> accessed December 11, 2019.

Lineage paper for Ann Essling, mndames.org.

Minnesota Railroads, 1849-75 Reminiscences of the Little Crow Uprising Dr. Asa W. Daniels page 33.

St. Peter Tribune, St. Peter, MN: May 2, 1960.

Weekly Ledger, Mankato: May 12, 1909.

Wikipedia entry for Governor Joseph Talcott, accessed December 11, 2019.

ⁱ *Weekly Ledger*, May 12, 1909, authored by Elizabeth Quane's son J.D. Quane, publisher. Mankato, MN

ⁱⁱ Ibid. *Weekly Ledger*, May 12, 1909.

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Peter Tribune*, Wednesday, May 2, 1860. St. Peter, MN

^{iv} *Minnesota Railroads, 1849-75 Reminiscences of the Little Crow Uprising* Dr. Asa W. Daniels page 33.

^v Ibid, *Weekly Ledger*, May 12, 1909.

^{vi} Ibid, *Weekly Ledger*, May 12, 1909.

^{vii} Ibid, *Weekly Ledger*, May 12, 1909.